



## Before, Thee, God Who Knowest All

**Text: Magnus Brostrup Landstad (1802-1880)**

**Tune: Unknown, *Geistliche Lieder*, Leipzig, 1539**

Hymns in the Confession and Absolution section of our hymnal (hymns 317-331) are a particular blessing. When we are worn down by our sin, angry at our flesh for doing what our spirit knows is wrong, and desperate for consolation, these hymns teach us comforting truths. They point us to the words of Absolution given to us in the Divine Service and whenever we come seeking that particular comfort. With pleas like, “O God, be merciful to me” and refrains like, “Jesus sinners doth receive,” we know where to turn when our conscience is oppressed and we need the comfort only forgiveness can give.

This comfort was known to Magnus Landstad, the author of “Before Thee, God, Who Knowest All.” Landstad did not live a life of great comfort. In fact, he was motivated to write hymns after reading Philipp Nicolai’s work, *Mirror of Joy*, which he wrote in the midst of every chaos imaginable. From Nicolai’s work, he learned more about the comfort that comes only from Christ and His Gifts and was motivated to continue giving that hymnic comfort that Nicolai gave.

Landstad was born in Maaso, Norway on October 7, 1802, where his father was a Lutheran Pastor. His youth was shadowed by storms and famine, and because of that was never able to go school. However, his father gave him the bulk of his education before he enrolled in university studies in theology in 1822. However, he had to take a year off shortly after beginning to take a job to pay for school. He eventually returned and graduated with high honors in December 1827. In November 1828 he became the vicar (traveling pastor) of Gausdal. He married Vilhelmine Lassen in 1829. After

five more years he finally received a regular pastorate at the Lutheran church in Kviteseid, and five years later succeeded his father as pastor at Seljord. However, shortly before taking that position he fought pneumonia for one year. He spent eight hard years there. In 1849 he became pastor in Fredrikshald. He worked as a sole pastor there until 1852, at which time he was given an assistant. After seven years there he moved to Sanherred, and spent the next seventeen years there. Finally he retired in 1876. He and his wife celebrated their golden anniversary in 1879. He died on October 9, 1880.

As was mentioned before, buying a copy of Nicolai’s *Mirror of Joy* sparked Landstad’s interest in hymn writing. However, he did not begin writing them until his time spent in Gausdal. His writing continued on in Kviteseid when he wrote three hymns for the Reformation Festival in 1837. His hymns caught the attention of the officials of the Lutheran Church of Norway, and they approached him during his stay in Seljord, asking him to compile a new hymnal for the churches of Norway. He declined that offer. However, after he began his work in Fredrikshald he was approached again. After he was granted an assistant pastor he began work on what eventually became the *Kirke-Salmebog et Udkast* in 1861. Though it received some criticism, he defended his work, while making minor adjustments. In the end, it ended up being used by 70% of the Lutheran congregations in Norway.

“Before Thee, God, Who Knowest All” was an original composition for the *Kirke-Salmebog*. He based each stanza on a Bible verse. Stanza one is based on Ezra 9:6, 15; stanza two on Psalm 51:11; and stanza three on Luke 18:14. Ezra 9:6 is the verse that best captures the spirit of this hymn: “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.” This underlies the refrain, “O God, be merciful to me.” Finally, stanza three confesses where this mercy is found: the precious Blood of Jesus, for us a cleansing flood. Because we are washed in that Blood, we go to our house justified, at peace with God. When we receive this Blood in the Holy Communion, we know, without a doubt, that God has been merciful to us.